Chapter 5

Structure: The Organization of Stories

Structure refers to the ways in which writers arrange materials in accord with the general ideas and purposes of their works. Unlike plot, which is focused on conflict or conflicts (see Chapter 1), structure defines the layouts of works—the ways the story, play, or poem is shaped. Structure is about matters such as placement, balance, recurring themes, true and misleading conclusions, suspense, and the imitation of models or forms such as reports, letters, conversations, or confessions. A work might be divided into numbered sections or parts, or it might begin in a countryside (or one state) and conclude in a city (or another state), or it might develop a relationship between two people from their first introduction to their falling in love.

The importance of structure may be seen graphically in the art of the painter. As an example, the painting *Harbour at Sunset* (p. I–3), by the French painter Claude Lorrain (1600–1682), pictures a lifelike scene comprising a harbor, ships, boats, buildings, and a shore on which people are working, chatting, transacting business, and fighting. Near the horizon, the distant and glowing sun bathes the scene in light, which seems therefore to be the source of all the human activities in the painting. This structuring of figures and background brings out contrasts between human beings, human artifacts and nature, and human existence and the cosmos. Claude's painting suggests that, despite temporary human concerns, the source of life is like the sun—remote, vast, mysterious, and beautiful. In fiction, we find that organization and structure highlight many similar contrasts. To study structure is to study these arrangements and the purposes for which they are made.

Formal Categories of Structure

Many aspects of structure are common to all genres of literature. Particularly for stories and plays, however, the following aspects form a skeleton, a pattern of development.

The Exposition Provides the Materials Necessary to Put the Plot into Operation

Exposition is the laying out, the putting forth, of the materials in the story—the main characters, their backgrounds, their characteristics, interests, goals, limitations, potentials, and basic assumptions. Exposition may not be limited to the beginning of the work, where it is most expected, but may be found anywhere. Thus, intricacies,

twists, turns, false leads, blind alleys, surprises, and other quirks may be introduced to interest, intrigue, perplex, mystify, and please readers. Whenever something new arises, to the degree that it is new it is a part of exposition.

The Complication Marks the Beginning and the Growth of the Conflict

The **complication** is the onset and development of the major conflict—the plot. The major participants are the protagonist and antagonist, together with whatever ideas and values they represent, such as good or evil, freedom or oppression, independence or dependence, love or hate, intelligence or stupidity, and knowledge or ignorance.

The Crisis Marks the Decisions Made to End the Conflict

The **crisis** (the Greek word for *judgment* or *separation*—a separating, distinguishing, or turning point) marks that part of the action where the conflict reaches its greatest tension. During the crisis, a decision or an action is undertaken to resolve the complication or complications, and therefore the crisis is that point at which uncertainty and anxiety are greatest. Usually the crisis is followed closely by the next stage, the *climax*. In fact, the two often occur so near each other that they are considered the same.

The Climax Is the Conclusion of the Conflict

Because the **climax** (the Greek word for *ladder*) is a consequence of the crisis, it is the story's *high point* (from the idea of a ladder) and may take the shape of an action, a decision, an affirmation or denial, or an illumination or realization. It is the logical conclusion of the preceding actions; no new major developments follow it. In most stories, the climax occurs at the end or close to it. For example, in Tom Whitecloud's "Blue Winds Dancing" (this chapter), the young Native-American narrator has left college in California and has returned home to his welcoming family in northern Wisconsin, just at Christmas time. Standing by a frozen lake near the lodge of his native home, he hears the ice groaning with the cold, and he ponders the truth of an Indian legend about "an old woman under the ice, trying to get out so she can punish some runaway lovers" (paragraph 30). He thinks that if he is genuinely Indian, he will instinctively know that the story is true. As he listens to the ice, he concludes that it is true—that "there is an old woman under the ice." This realization is the story's climax, embodying the security and happiness that the narrator has dreamed about and hoped for.

The Resolution or Dénouement Finishes the Work and Releases the Tension

The **resolution** (the Latin word for *untying* or *releasing*) or **dénouement** (the French word for *untying* or *undoing*) is the completing of the story or play after the climax; for once the climax has occurred, the work's tension and uncertainty are finished,

and most authors conclude quickly to avoid losing their readers' interest. For instance, Jin ends "Saboteur" (this chapter) by stating that an epidemic suddenly struck. In other words, after the story's major conflicts are finished, the dénouement brings the work to a satisfying and rapid ending.

Formal and Actual Structure

The structure just described is a *formal* one, an ideal pattern that moves directly from beginning to end. Few narratives and dramas follow this pattern exactly, however. A mystery story might hold back crucial details of exposition (because the goal is to mystify); a suspense story might keep the protagonist ignorant but provide readers with abundant details in order to maximize concern and tension about the outcome.

More realistic, less "artificial" stories might also contain structural variations. For example, Welty's "A Worn Path" (this chapter) produces a *double take* because of unique structuring. During most of the story the major character, Phoenix, seems to be in conflict with age, poverty, and environment. At the end, however, the story brings out an additional difficulty—a new conflict that enlarges our responses to include not just concern but also heartfelt anguish. "A Worn Path" is just one example of how a structural variation maximizes the impact of a work.

There are many other possible variants in structure. One of these is called **flashback,** or **selective recollection,** in which present circumstances are explained by the selective introduction of past events. The moment at which the flashback is introduced may be a part of the resolution of the plot, and the flashback might lead you into a moment of climax but then go from there to develop the details that are more properly part of the exposition. Let us again consider our brief story about John and Jane (Chapter 1) and use the flashback method of structuring the story:

> Jane is now old, and a noise outside causes her to remember the argument that forced her to part with John many years before. They were deeply in love, but their disagreement about her wishes for a career and equality split them apart. Then she pictures in her mind the years she and John have spent happily together after they married. She then contrasts her present happiness with her memory of her earlier, less happy marriage, and from there she recalls her youthful years of courtship with John before their disastrous conflict developed. Then she looks over at John, reading in a chair, and smiles. John smiles back, and the two embrace. Even then, Jane has tears on her cheeks.

In this structure the action begins and remains in the present. Important parts of the past flood the protagonist's memory in flashback, though not in the order in which they happened. Memory might be used structurally in other ways. An example is Katherine Anne Porter's "The Jilting of Granny Weatherall" (Chapter 7), an intense story that is developed within the dying imaginings of an aged woman, Granny Weatherall. As she passes in and out of consciousness on her deathbed, we follow her recollection of major events in her life, such as being deserted on her wedding day, remarrying and bringing up her children, enduring her long widowhood, losing a favorite daughter, and retaining her lifelong obligation

to her church. In short, this story builds its chronology through a series of apparently disconnected but closely unified flashbacks.

Each narrative or drama has its own unique structure. Some stories may be organized according to simple geography, as in Whitecloud's "Blue Winds Dancing" (a ride from California to Wisconsin [this chapter]) and Munro's "The Found Boat" (from a spring flood to an exploration on and beside a river, in Chapter 6). Parts or scenes might be carried on through a period of dying fantasy, as in Ambrose Bierce's "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" (Chapter 1). Additionally, parts of a work may be set out as fragments of conversation, as in St. Luke's "The Parable of the Prodigal Son" (Chapter 7), or as a ceremony, as in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown" (Chapter 7), or as an announcement of a party, as in "The Necklace" (Chapter 3). The possible variations in literary structures are infinite.

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RALPH ELLISON (1914–1994)

Ralph Ellison was born in Oklahoma seven years after it became a state. As a youth he was attracted to music, particularly jazz; and at one point he planned on becoming a classical music composer, his ideal being Richard Wagner, the giant among nineteenth century German operatic composers. In 1933 Ellison went to Alabama's Tuskeegee Institute, but after three years he left for New York with a plan to become a sculptor. Once in New York, he met Richard Wright (1908–1960), and with Wright's encouragement and influence he began writing essays and stories for magazines such as New Challenge *and* New Masses. *Before he published* Invisible Man *in 1952, his best known works were the stories "King of the Bingo Game" and "Flying Home." With* Invisible Man, *which won a National Book Award in 1953, his work became widely read and taught. In 1964 he published* Shadow and Act, *a collection of essays, and in 1985 he published* Going to the Territory, *a book of essays and interviews. In later years he held a chair in humanities at New York University. His works published posthumously are* The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison *(1995),* Flying Home and Other Stories *(1996), and the novel* Juneteenth *(1999).*

Battle Royal (1952)

It goes a long way back, some twenty years. All my life I had been looking for something, and everywhere I turned someone tried to tell me what it was. I accepted their answers too, though they were often in contradiction and even self-contradictory. I was naïve. I was